

Better Than Before: Parashat Ki Tavo

This summer, in preparation for the High Holidays and the period of fervent resolution-making they usher in, I have been reading “Better Than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives” by Gretchen Rubin. Through this book I’ve gained some interesting insights into my own tendencies towards routine and change – for example that I’m generally an “upholder” who strives to meet both inner and outer expectations, a “marathoner” who plugs away at a slow and steady pace, and a “simplicity lover” who enjoys calm and quiet workspaces and avoids clutter. I’ve also gained some interesting insights into those phenomena that tend to support change more broadly, one of which – perhaps no surprise – is accountability. Rubin reports that in a study where individuals were asked to pay voluntarily for drinks they took from an office kitchen, people paid more honestly when the price list was accompanied by the image of two eyes than when accompanied by a flower image and that, in a different study, when a life-sized cutout of a policeman was placed at a train station in Boston, bicycle thefts decreased by two thirds. Apparently, being reminded that others may see and take note of our behavior makes us quite a bit more likely to behave well – even if there’s no one actually present to witness our actions.

Like many insights from the world of psychology, Rubin’s observations about accountability are both totally obvious and somewhat counter-intuitive. While we know full well about peer pressure and “people pleasing” and not wanting to get sent to jail, understand that we often act in ways to garner approval or avoid embarrassment and punishment, still it seems odd that a mere image alone should so strongly influence our actions. Furthermore, we tend to think of ourselves as moral beings motivated by intrinsic ideas of “right” and “wrong” more than the prying eyes of our friends or law enforcement’s unyielding stick. We don’t steal bikes from train stations because of the values we hold dear, not

because of the cardboard cut-out that may or may not be gracing the railroad tracks. Rubin's research then raises the question: Are we motivated by external factors more than we might choose to believe? What is it that truly leads us to make the choices that we make each day?

While I began Rubin's book thinking about Rosh Hashanah and new year's resolutions and, if I'm being honest, trying to exercise a bit more often, her research led me to the exploration of what has often been a vexing religious question for me – one which becomes particularly pronounced in the Book of Deuteronomy in which we now find ourselves. This text, essentially Moses' soliloquy to the Children of Israel as they stand poised to enter the Land into which their fearless leader will not accompany them, is the prophet's impassioned plea that the people keep God's laws and act with decency and justice, that they follow the *mitzvoth* (commandments) and remain faithful to the Divine. In a book about doing good, however, there is a conspicuous absence of moral language – about doing what's right because it's the right thing to do – and instead a strong emphasis on reward and punishment that we recognize from well-known passages like the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*: "If you will earnestly heed the *mitzvot* that I give you this day...then I will favor your land with rain at the proper season...[But] take care lest you be tempted to forsake God and turn to false gods in worship. For then the wrath of the Lord will be directed against you" (Deuteronomy 11:13-21). In what should be the very place for Moses to explain why it is so important to live out the ideas and values for which Torah stands, he instead seems to resort to a fairly primitive form of discipline: bribes and threats. Deuteronomy has its beautiful parts, to be sure, some of which can be found in next week's Torah portion, *Nitzavim*. In general, however, its inspiration tends to be more of the fear-mongering variety rather than an appeal to higher ideals.

It is precisely this kind of emphasis on reward and punishment rather than on general notions of goodness and right that we see in our Torah portion this week, *Parashat Ki Tavo*. In a section that is known as the *tochecha* (or rebuke), Moses explains that after the people have crossed the Jordan into Israel they should divide themselves between two mountains, Har Gerizim and Har Ebal, with six tribes standing on each one while the Levites recite aloud a long list of blessings and curses. The people are to affirm “Amen” as each of the behaviors for which curses shall be delivered is proclaimed and are treated to a detailed description of what such cursedness entails – calamities such as fever, drought, boils and itches from which one never recovers, famine, economic downfall, enemy attack, and more. Reading this list of terrible consequences, it is hard to reconcile such vicious punishment with the image of a compassionate and loving God, hard to understand why the curses – as they always do – outnumber the blessings by such a large ratio. We, too, want for the people to choose the right and the good. We only wish that the alternative wasn’t so very unpleasant.

All this, of course, raises yet another question – If right behavior is undertaken simply to gain reward and avoid punishment, how very right is it really? Most of us can understand that systems based upon carrot and stick do, at times, have their place – particularly when dealing with young children whose capacity may be more limited. And indeed, this is one of the explanations often given for Deuteronomy’s emphasis on this particular kind of education: the Children of Israel are still in their infancy as a nation, they are still a far distance from sophisticated notions of why and how one should ideally behave. Still, one of the things that we tend to value about Torah is its aspirational quality – the fact that it asks more of us than could ever be reasonably expected – and yet here it seems to fall short. Discipline through reward and punishment may create a safe, law-abiding society. But it doesn’t reach towards higher ideals of altruism, sacrifice, and morality that ultimately transform a community.

One of the jokes that Rubin shares in her book is that of a policeman who, one evening, sees a man weaving around under a streetlight. “What are you doing?” the officer asks. “I’m looking for my keys,” answers the man, obviously drunk. “Is this where you lost them?” inquires the cop. “No, I lost them back there,” the man replies gesturing over his shoulder to a dark area of the sidewalk. “But the light is so much better over here.”

How often it is, says Rubin, that we begin new enterprises in the place that is easy! Sometimes this is to our detriment – as when we look for keys in a place where they’re not likely to be found – but other times it makes good sense to start with a more manageable, attainable goal in order to have quick and easy success that can then bolster further improvement. This, I like to think, is perhaps what God and Moses had in mind as they prepared the people to enter the Land of Israel. To grow *B’nai Yisrael* into a God-fearing, right-doing nation motivated purely by love for the Divine and a desire to do good was the ultimate goal. But faced with a people whose parents had known slavery, where carrot and stick was all they really understood and who had perhaps transmitted such notions of right and wrong to their children, God chose to begin in a place that was easy by appealing to familiar and well-known tropes. Good for good’s sake would come later. First there needed to be good for any sake at all.

This insight, too, along with Rubin’s research perhaps helps to explain the long, graphic list of blessings and curses that accompanies our *parasha*. It seems that we, as humans, are motivated by accountability; for better or worse we act differently when we believe that others are watching or noting our actions (and even when we are but reminded that they could be), not to mention we act differently when there are consequences attached to the decisions that we make. By having the Levites recite the *tochecha* in full sight and voice of all the people who then had to affirm after it, Moses was

not only threatening *B'nai Yisrael* in the conventional sense of reminding them what punishments were to come if they went astray. He was also putting up the equivalent of a two-eyed image or a cardboard cop cut-out. He was reminding the people that their community and their God would be watching their behavior always and that they should act accordingly.

We often think of Torah as a grand project -- of creating good people and good society, of introducing ethical monotheism to the world. But, as Rubin's book demonstrates, grand visions are made up of many hundreds of small choices, steps, and habits, and it can sometimes be more effective to focus on the micro rather than the macro. First priority for God was to get *B'nai Yisrael* behaving in the right and proper way, even if this was accomplished by appealing to less than ideal educational methods.

Generations later, we hopefully have moved the conversation a turn forward by considering not only how we should behave but the greater moral principles that underlie these convictions.

The Children of Israel, standing on the banks of the Jordan, undoubtedly believed in the veracity of Moses' blessings and curses. These were people who had seen *manna* fall from the sky and water gush out of a rock, who had heard stories about the splitting of the Red Sea and the routing of the Egyptians, who understood that God could work in miraculous and supernatural ways. Their motivation to do the right and the good in order to receive reward and avoid punishment may not have been morally sophisticated but it was powerful nonetheless.

We, however, find ourselves in quite the opposite situation. Looking at the world around us it does not seem that God intervenes as promised in the Book of Deuteronomy, it does not appear that the good

prosper and the wicked stumble. We need a different reason to pursue what is just. We attempt to do right because it is the right thing to do. Yet, as Rubin reminds us, we are not always as good as sticking to our convictions as we might wish to be, nor are our convictions necessarily as pure as we'd like to believe. While it's not consumption or cattle disease we fear when making a wrong step, it just might be monetary fines or our spouse's disapproval or an exaggerated eye-roll from a stranger in the supermarket. Blessings and curses need not be proclaimed from the mountains in order to hold some amount of sway over our lives. Even a picture, it seems, can influence our behavior. Still, I like to believe we have come a far way from the world of the *tochecha*. Accountability and consequence may, at times, impact how we act. But when we have the opportunity to explain the choices that we make, we will opt for moral language over that of reward and punishment.

"Cursed be he who will not uphold the terms of this Teaching and observe them – And let us say: Amen," we read in our *parasha* (Deuteronomy 27:26). May we also find great blessing in making good choices for very their own sake. Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Annie Tucker